

# **MY FATHER WAS A TEACHER**

**a story about the perseverance of a nation and a teacher  
during the first half of the twentieth century**

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## **Dedication**

**to all who hold with honor  
the title of Teacher  
with all my love, affection and reverence**

## CHAPER ONE

### A MOMENT IN LIFE

My father was a teacher.

I observed him during his journey through life, carrying chalk in the morning and a red pen in the evening. I often saw him rushing out at sunrise to get to his first class, and walking back at sunset, burdened by the copybooks he had to correct by the faint light of a lantern, swinging in the evening breeze. This is why the lenses of his glasses grew thicker day by day.

I loved him because he was my father. I respected and pitied him because he was a teacher and I was a student. Now I know quite well that the mischievous acts my classmates --and even I--used to play on our teachers greatly distressed them, both about their profession and about life.

I often used to ask my father sarcastically:

“Do they pay you enough for this enormous effort?”

And he would gently smile and say :

“Don’t expect life to give you the exact equivalent for what you expend. Now, I am not a grocer or a pharmacist who can set a price for the items he displays. Yet, I am confident that my efforts will somehow be rewarded. I don’t know how it will come back to me, nor do I expect it. I believe that teaching is neither a clerical position, a profession, nor a job, but a life long mission.”

I would smile. I thought he was saying this as a way of convincing himself that he ought to be satisfied with so little, especially since he was destined to be a teacher.

As the days passed, he would give of himself, body and soul. He spared no effort in his mission. But what I dreaded happened: he fell sick. He came to Cairo so that I would take him to see a doctor. I chose a famous specialist who taught in Kasr ElAiny University, the most reputable Egyptian medical institute. Everyone held him in esteem and respect and his reputation went beyond the borders of our country. We sat in the waiting room after paying the examination fee, namely two pounds. This was a lot of money in those days, given my father’s salary as a teacher.

After a long wait, we were led to the doctor’s room. He took a quick glance at us, then his eyes rested on my father for a moment. He came towards him and greeted him warmly and courteously. I took this to be the way the doctor treated all his patients—a laudable habit that he had acquired. He began to examine my father. It surprised me that the examination took a very long time. He then sat with us and asked my father dozens of questions: many were personal and not related to my father’s health problem. He even asked about my studies. I took this to be his curiosity and that he simply wanted to make conversation. He then pointed out that it would be necessary for my father to spend a few days in a hospital and tactfully suggested that it should be in his own clinic. My father was reluctant to accept, for he knew we could not afford this physician’s private clinic, not to mention his fees. In silence, the doctor wrote a few remarks while my father and I were unfortunately unable to avoid thinking that we were being exploited. When the

doctor had finished writing, he turned away from us for a brief moment. I didn't take any notice of what he was doing. He, then, turned and came to my father, gave him the paper after folding it several times.

The doctor said:

“Bring these things, some clothes and come to my private hospital tomorrow morning. The address is on this card.”

As we walked towards the door, I heard him repeating rote phrases that did not seem significant at first. He said:

“How pleasant to have seen you! May you live long and enjoy good health!”

“I am honored by your visit! This is a blessed event!”

Before we reached the door, my father had unfolded the paper the doctor had given him and found that it contained two folded up pieces of paper money: two pounds. Raising his voice in a questioning tone, and with a surprised look on his face, my father asked:

“What is this, Doctor?”

The doctor smiled and said in a respectful tone:

“This is the examination fee, Mr. Youssef.”

“Why are you returning it?”

A sweet gentle smile covered the man's face and he stretched out his hand to grasp my father's hand that held the money, saying:

“I would be grateful if you were to accept this money and will be even more grateful if you would sit for a moment to allow me to explain.”

We sat.

The voice of the great learned doctor began to tremble as he spoke. He said,

“I do not think you remember me, my dear teacher; but I have never forgotten you. I am one of your sons, one of your pupils from Beni Suef (a city in the south of Egypt). I know that parades of hundreds, even thousands of pupils were taught by you. It is not easy for you to remember them, especially when they have become older. But for them, your image is imprinted on their mind. I, personally, have lived all these years hoping to meet you again. You are behind every successful step I take in my life.”

My father and I sat in silence. The doctor's voice became deeper and more tremulous:

“Here, in my office, I have my composition copybook in which you wrote with your own hand a phrase that shed light on my whole life.”

The doctor reached into one of the drawers of his desk and took out an old copybook with an elegant leather cover. He skimmed through the pages and handed it to my father who eagerly gazed at his own handwriting. The words he had written in red ink were:

“Son, one day I hope you will become as good a doctor and a man as the one you portray in your essay. This is my wish for you. Will you make it come true?”

My father, who had remained silent all this time, said:

“Thank God! Thank God! I thought I had wasted my life!”

Words quickly poured from the doctor's lips:

“Wasted your life? You made the life of others. You were able to build humans. You teachers are the real craftsmen in these culture centers that produce doctors, engineers, journalists, lawyers, and all those who are successful in life. You are the

foundation. You are the ones who create heroes, guides, leaders, though you yourselves live as unknown soldiers. But be assured that gratitude resides in the hearts of your children.”

As his eyes welled up, my father murmured:

“I have gone through my life as a teacher for the sake of a moment like this. The salary a teacher earns is no compensation for his effort. His compensation is a moment like this: it crowns his work, his whole life.”

My father spread out his palm that held the two pounds and said: “This sum is not two pounds, it is more than a million pounds. Indeed, the light that the chalk and the red pen dimmed has come back today. The strength I lost along with my voice while teaching in the classroom has returned to me. And it is you, my dear son, who did this. I feel that you have placed me on a pedestal, one higher than the pedestal of glory.”

My father rose and, with tears in his eyes, made his way to the door. The renowned doctor assisted him and said in a sincere deep voice:

“I am truly honored by your visit.”

Needless to say, he treated my father without charge and gave him utmost care and attention. My father recovered and returned to class, toiling and laboring to light up the path his pupils would take in the future. He kept the two pounds the doctor had returned to him in an elegant little box. Even though he often needed them, he never spent them. Whenever he became overburdened, whenever he felt tired or exhausted, he would quickly go to the little box, open it, look into it with appreciation and gratitude. Often he would touch the pound notes and sigh in relief. Then, with a wide smile of satisfaction that lit up his face, he would close the box. My father bequeathed these two pounds in an elegant box to me, along with his mission and profession.

Why don't we start his story from the beginning?